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Center for People Empowerment in Governance (CenPEG)

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COMELEC, Smartmatic-TIM should stop demonizing critics

A policy institute based in the University of the Philippines today took to task a Smartmatic-TIM executive for saying that critics of the automated elections in 2010 are against “clean and transparent elections.”

Speaking for the Center for People Empowerment in Governance (CenPEG), Prof. Bobby Tuazon said the Smartmatic-TIM official should be discerning enough to distinguish critics who are calling for open, credible, and transparent automated elections against those who are against it simply because it may prevent cheating which was rampant during previous manual election systems.

In fact, Tuazon said, “we find the Precinct Count Optical Scan-Optical Mark Reader (PCOS-OMR) system that the Comelec has adopted vulnerable to wholesale electronic cheating.” The system, which Smartmatic’s counting machines will implement, lacks transparency thus making it susceptible to automated cheating aside from being prone to machine errors and hardware deficiencies.

Tuazon was replying to a statement issued by Smartmatic-TIM executives led by Antonio Mugica, the company’s chief executive officer, that they expected criticism from people who “feel threatened by cleaner and transparent elections.” Mugica’s statement was reported by the media today with supporting words from Comelec Chairman Jose Melo saying that critics who were “comfortable” with the cheating-plagued manual system of voting would be against computerized balloting.

The poll body and Smartmatic-TIM should stop demonizing critics of automated elections as “cheats” or people promoting “No-el”, Tuazon said.

Smartmatic, a Dutch-Venezuelan company whose local partner TIM is reportedly Cebu-based, was recently awarded by the Comelec with the contract to supply the 82,000 machines for the 2010 polls. Tuazon also said that the Comelec instead should be well-advised about the controversies surrounding its bidding awardee and the people linked to its previous projects.

CenPEG published a recent study showing Comelec’s mishandling of the OMR’s pilot testing in the August 2008 ARMM elections and its ill-preparedness for the full automation of the coming May 2010 elections. (The study, “Comelec’s PCOS-OMR system rejects public counting, enhances wholesale cheating; Who controls the technology controls the votes” is available at www.cenpeg.org.)

Center for People Empowerment in Governance (CenPEG)

3/F, College of Social Work and Community Development Bldg., University of the Philippines, Diliman, Quezon City, Philippines
Telefax: +632-9299526 email: cenpeg@cenpeg.org; cenpeg.info@gmail.com website: <http://www.cenpeg.org>



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CenPEG two weeks ago asked the Comelec to make available for public scrutiny the source code of the winning bidder as one way of establishing the integrity of the AES system. It has received no reply from the poll body.

Tuazon clarified that CenPEG supports the automation of the country's election system. But Comelec's choice of technology runs counter to the democratic principle of secret voting and public counting, he stressed.

Both Smartmatic-TIM and Comelec cannot claim to be transparent when their technology does not comply with the requirements of public counting and transparency as mandated by RA 9369, the Omnibus Election Code, and other election laws, the CenPEG political analyst said.

By shutting all doors to criticisms, critical questions, and public debates, the Comelec shows its aversion to transparency, he said.

"So how can there be transparent elections when the poll body – along with its election automation – rejects public scrutiny, accountability, and open debates," Tuazon said.

Tuazon reminded both the company and Comelec about the high stakes in the coming elections and that, therefore, they should welcome all questions and criticisms for the sake of open, credible, and transparent elections. #

For details about this news release, please contact:

**Roda Manalac, CenPEG, Tel/Fax 9299526
Email address: cenpeg.info@gmail.com
Website: www.cenpeg.org
Mobile Phone No.: 09156418055**